



The Struggle for Sea Power: Lessons from the Great War

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Abstract: The history of the contest for naval mastery during the Great War has particular resonance for today because the United States now faces a serious threat from China's increasing capabilities to wage war at sea. China's naval challenge calls into question America's continued command of the maritime commons. The stakes at risk for the United States in today's contest are just as high as they were a hundred years ago for Britain. Defeat at sea would wreck American global leadership in the twenty-first century just as surely as it would have meant the collapse of British power in the twentieth. What, then, can we learn from past struggles for sea power and America's entry into the First World War that offers guidance for understanding our current strategic predicament?

One hundred years ago, President Woodrow Wilson summoned the American people to “fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.” The United States, in choosing war, was fighting for the high moral purpose of creating a new, more secure and liberal international order: “The world must be made safe for democracy.”¹ Waging war would, in turn, reshape the United States, its government, institutions, society, economy, culture, and politics: fighting “over there” would forever change who we are as a people “over here” at home.

The American decision for war was triggered by, what Winston Churchill called, “a life-and-death struggle” at sea between the navies of Great Britain and Imperial Germany.² Germany, a rising challenger, with aspirations to world power,

¹ President Woodrow Wilson, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress Requesting a Declaration of War Against Germany,” April 2, 1917, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=65366>.

² Winston S. Churchill, in James W. Muller, ed., *Thoughts and Adventures* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2009), p. 134.

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was contesting the command of the maritime commons against Britain, the reigning superpower, which was accustomed to thinking of itself as the indispensable leader of the international system. On the outcome of this fight for naval mastery rested nothing less than the fate of empires. To whom did the future belong—the rising power or the keeper of the system? The stakes of the naval war were high. The winner at sea would win the war. The war at sea would decide the question of world power or decline for these competing empires.



President Woodrow Wilson

This clash at sea propelled the United States into the war and to take on the role of a superpower on the world stage. When war broke out in Europe during the summer of 1914, President Wilson aimed to preserve American neutrality. Wilson also sought to act as an intermediary, to broker negotiations among the warring states of Europe, to end the fighting. Even as the war at sea escalated—in particular, a German submarine sinking the great British ocean liner *Lusitania* in May 1915, involving the loss of American life—Wilson maintained: “There is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight. There is such a thing as a nation being so right that it does not need to convince others by force that it is right.”³

Wilson, however, could not keep the United States neutral as Britain and Germany escalated the fighting for command of the sea. It was not only Britain and Germany that had high stakes riding on the outcome of the naval contest: so, too, did the United States. American security and wellbeing were being challenged by Germany’s rising power. German submarines acting as predators to disrupt the global maritime commons. The young journalist Walter Lippmann, writing in the

³ President Woodrow Wilson, “Address to Naturalized Citizens at Convention Hall, Philadelphia,” May 10, 1915, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=65388>.

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